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The Illuminati

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OTHER

Everything You Didn't Know About The Origins Of The Illuminati

Christopher Shultz
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What exactly is the Illuminati? Conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones believe it is a clandestine, possibly satanic organization secretly controlling every aspect of the world as we know it. According to rumors, the Illuminati even orchestrated several celebrity deaths for the group's own societal gain. The organization's alleged ultimate goal is to implement the New World Order, described by *New York Magazine* writer Hua Hsu as "an all-powerful,

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The Illuminati's Origins Are Sort Of Anti-Religious

Outwardly, the man behind the Order of the Illuminati, Adam Weishaupt, seemed like an ordinary scholar, professor, and family man. In 1775, he began teaching natural and canon law at the University of Ingolstadt in the Electorate of Bavaria, which is now a part of Germany.

Weishaupt grew up in Ingolstadt and was orphaned at an early age. He was largely educated by his uncle, an academic with an extensive library. Possessing a naturally restless mind, Weishaupt consumed every French Enlightenment text available to him. The ideas in these books led Weishaupt to develop a general mistrust of states dominated by religious views, especially his heavily Catholic homeland, Bavaria.

He was not against religion altogether, but he insisted its imposition upon the state hindered free thought. He believed the Catholic Church, in particular, was intolerant and bigoted. Thus, to combat the Church's stranglehold on knowledge in his country, he began to envision a formal group favoring illumination rather than suppression.

Photo: Christoph Wilhelm Bock / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Modern Culture Has Added To The Society's Anti-Christian Connotations

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Adam Weishaupt's personal views inadvertently led to our modern interpretation of the Illuminati as an anti-Christian or[illegible] Michael Barkun, author of *A Culture of Conspiracy*, notes the connection between conspiracy theorists and fundamentalist Christians worried about the Antichrist.

This is due to the influence of writers like Texe Marrs, who believed political elites were "beholden to the Antichrist," as well as televangelist Pat Robertson. His 1991 book *The New World Order* purports to expose a satanic "Establishment" of networked organizations secretly controlling the world, including New Age leaders, Freemasons, and, of course, the Illuminati.

Moreover, author Dan Brown's 2000 novel *Angels & Demons* presents readers with a resurfaced Illuminati that is "deeply anti-Christian" and hellbent on revenge against the Catholic Church. While Brown isn't solely responsible for re-imagining the Illuminati as we known it today, his novel's popularity (as well as that of its sequel, *The Da Vinci Code*) certainly helped.

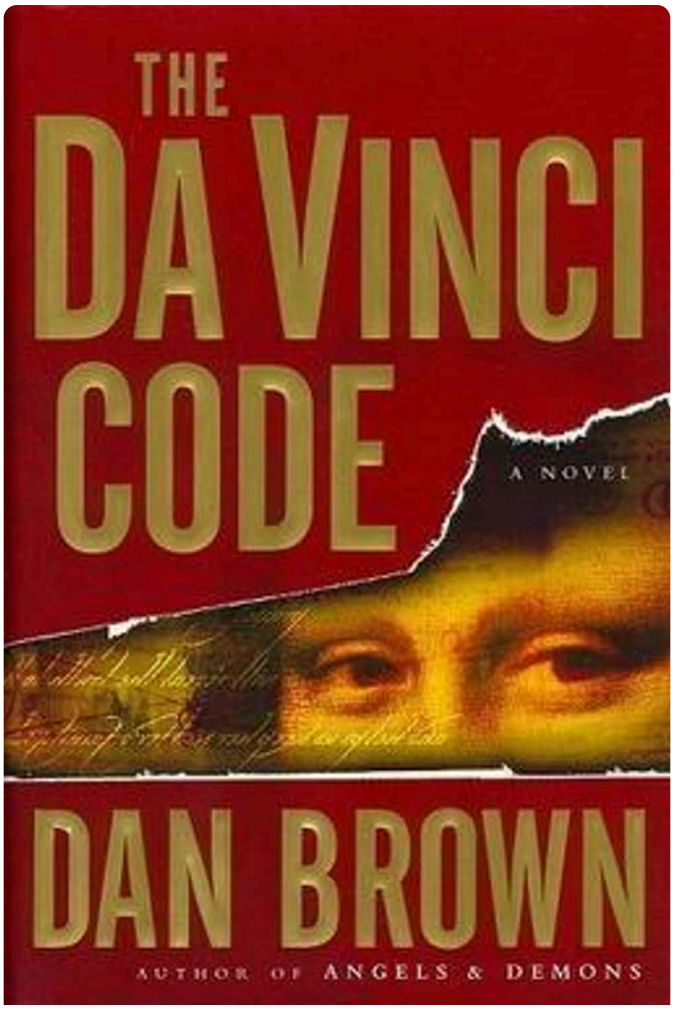


Photo: Doubleday

The Freemasons And The Illuminati Are Distant Cousins At Best

Photo: Beyond My Ken / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0

If there's any group as commonly associated with conspiracy theories as the Illuminati, it's the Freemasons, another secular secret society founded at least 60 years prior. When Adam Weishaupt sought an organization eschewing religion in favor of intellectual enlightenment, he considered joining a Masonic lodge, but did not formally join their ranks (at least, not at first).

Accounts differ as to why Weishaupt did not join the Freemasons. According to *National Geographic*, he became "disillusioned" with the Masons' beliefs - and the disillusionment was possibly due to the organization's religious leanings. On the other hand, Live Science states Weishaupt lacked the funds necessary to join, and also felt the group was too well-known to properly support his quest toward illumination outside of the watchful eye of the Church.

Whatever the case, on May 1, 1776, Weishaupt ended up forming his own society, the Order of the Illuminati. However, even though he forged his own path, Weishaupt and early member Baron Adolph von Knigge borrowed generously from the Freemasons' basic structure.

They implemented secret code names (Weishaupt was Spartacus, for instance, while Knigge went by Philo); created a membership hierarchy based on seniority and extent of knowledge, with the ability to ascend into higher "ranks;" and partook in bizarre initiation rituals, though details remain scant thanks to the society's secrecy.

But Weishaupt wasn't quite done with the Freemasons. Nearly a year after founding the Illuminati, he joined his local Masonic lodge. This was not a two-timing situation, however; Weishaupt joined in order to recruit Masons over to his own organization - a poaching effort other Illuminati members adopted, as well.

Because of the relative proximity of the groups' foundations, as well as the similarities between their operations - especially their clandestine nature - many people conflate or confuse the two groups. This may, in part, explain why some believe the Illuminati still exists. While Weishaupt's group caved within a decade, the Freemasons remain active.

The Illuminati Did Not Use The Eye Of Providence As Their Symbol

Photo: Vic / Flickr / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Conspiracy theorists often point to the Eye of Providence - the symbol of an eye, sometimes hovering within a triangle - as evidence of modern-day Illuminati influence. One only has to search Google Images for "Illuminati" for proof of this. Even prominent celebrities like rapper Jay-Z and his superstar singer wife Beyoncé (both accused of acting as agents for the secret society) playfully flash triangles and encircle their eyes at concerts.

But how did this symbol become so entangled with the Illuminati, especially since neither Adam Weishaupt nor any member of the Illuminati ever adopted it into the society's iconography? The answer has to do with the Founding Fathers of the United States, as well as the Freemasons.

According to Business Insider writers Nathaniel Lee and David Anderson, the symbol has roots in Christianity, with the three points of its triangle representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The eye supposedly represents the all-seeing eye of God - though its basic structure may reference the Egyptian Eye of Horus, a falcon god able to "see all."

As historian S. Brent Morris notes, this "all-seeing eye" appeared in numerous Renaissance works and was a recognizable symbol by the time the Founding Fathers set about creating a new country.

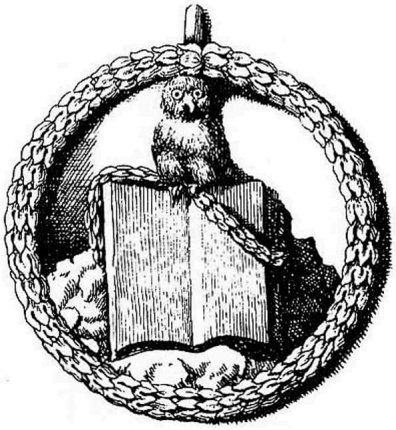
Weishaupt sought enlightenment apart from the Catholic Church - an institution literally watching over Bavaria - so it seems unlikely he would choose such a religiously charged symbol to represent his society. However, prominent players in the American Revolution created their own version of the emblem to act as the new country's Great Seal, which eventually found its way onto the back of the US $1 bill.

They chose a pyramid - either unwittingly or intentionally recalling Egyptian iconography - with the Eye of Providence floating above it because the structure represented strength and stability. According to Nancy Marshall-Genzer of *Marketplace*, "The Founding Fathers wanted the country to last as long as the pyramids." The eye serves the same purpose, with God always watching over the United States. In the eyes of the Founding Fathers, the country's success directly depended upon God's providence.

Many believe the prominence of Freemasonry membership among the Founding Fathers influenced their choice of the Eye of Providence as part of the Great Seal of the United States, but it was the other way around. While it is true the Freemasons used an all-seeing eye in some of their iconography, they didn't include a triangle in their designs until 1797, well after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Moreover, there was only one Mason on the design committee of the Great Seal: Benjamin Franklin. However, Congress rejected his contributions.

Despite these facts, and because the public tends to confuse the two groups, a tenacious theory persists. Some people still believe the Eye of Providence represents Weishaupt's society - and that its appearance on the US $1 bill denotes the push toward a New World Order.

The Owl Of Minerva Is The Society's Actual Mascot



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In Adam Weishaupt's original vision, Illuminati membership was broken into three basic ranks: novices, minervals (named after the Roman goddess Minerva), and illuminated minervals. Weishaupt chose the goddess's insignia, which features an owl sitting atop a book, to represent the third degree.

Why? Minerva was, among other things, the goddess of wisdom, her name deriving from the Latin word meminisse, "to remember." Thus, her insignia represented the Illuminati's thirst for knowledge and rational thought.

While most people (incorrectly) recognize the Eye of Providence as the Illuminati's main insignia, the Owl of Minerva occasionally crops up as an alleged New World Order mascot. Most notably, conspiracy theorists point to Bohemian Grove, an annual weekslong getaway for affluent and conservative white men, which has included almost every Republican US president since Calvin Coolidge. This excursion includes a ritualistic ceremony called the "Cremation of Care." It entails robe-clad members gathering around a 40-foot-tall owl statue to burn a coffin effigy christened "Care."

Illustrations of this owl shrine, as well as other owl symbology, feature prominently in the club's internal promotional material.

A Conspiracy Theorist Filmed 'Proof' Of The Illuminati

Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones secretly filmed the "Cremation of Care" and presented the footage as "proof" of Illuminati goings-on at Bohemian Grove. He also claimed there were underground "sex chambers" scattered throughout the Grove's compound, as well as real tombs housing infant human sacrifices.

A Bohemian Grove spokesperson insists the ritual is nothing more than "musical drama." Others claim it's a lighthearted excuse for men to get rowdy, drink excessively, make dirty jokes, and freely urinate in the woods (women aren't allowed to join).

And yet, because of the group's secrecy and elite membership, theories on its connection to the Illuminati and the New World Order abound. Complicating matters further is the supposed inclusion of a microscopic owl on the US $1 bill (the same note bearing the Eye of Providence). The bird allegedly sits near the numeral "1" on the front right side of the bill, hidden among intricate lace patterns.

Still, not everyone thinks the creature is an owl - some believe it's a spider, given the lace's weblike appearance. Others think it looks like a skull and crossbones. While interpretations abound, the mark is most likely a mere anti-counterfeit measure rather than a subtle nod to Illuminati influencers who congregate yearly at Bohemian Grove.

Photo: Michael Zimmerman / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0

Membership Exclusively Included The Wealthy Elite

In regards to membership, the Illuminati only accepted men with "a strong reputation with well-established familial and social connections, and wealth." Why was the group so exclusive? For better or worse, this was because of the Illuminati's desire to spread logic and reason throughout the superstitious, Catholic-controlled Bavarian state. Phil Edwards of Vox explains:

> [Adam] Weishaupt wanted to educate Illuminati members in reason, philanthropy, and other secular values so that they could influence political decisions when they came to power.

Photo: Liberal Freemason / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

And who came to power in 18th-century Bavaria? Wealthy, established individuals, of course. At the time, Bavaria was an electorate in the Holy Roman Empire, a complex of states ruled by monarchs. Average citizens did not rise to power. So while the Illuminati's membership requirements may seem elitist, Weishaupt implemented them to move his country away from public policy dictated by Catholic influence and toward decision-making rooted solely in logic and reason.

But given the secretive, elitist ways of Bohemian Grove and its supposedly nefarious undertones, many believe the Illuminati not only still exists, but also boasts members carefully selected from the wealthy "upper echelon" of society.

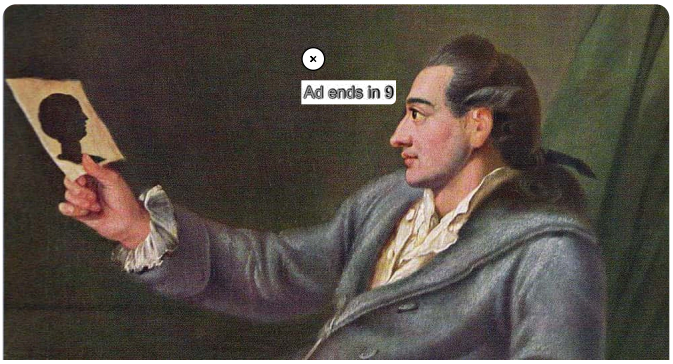
Rumored members include Queen Elizabeth II; the du Pont family; Bill and Melinda Gates; Barack Obama; the entire Bush family (no doubt for their associations with Bohemian Grove and Yale's secret boys' club, the Skull and Bones Society); Hillary Clinton (and maybe Bill Clinton, too); and even Donald Trump.

Several Celebrities Of The Day Were Members

In addition to philosophers, professors, and various prominent members of the Bavarian electorate, a few notable literary names joined the Illuminati during its heyday. According to historian Terry Melanson, perhaps the most well-known was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German writer most famous for his play *Faust* and novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Other authors included Francesco Mario Pagano, Jens Baggesen, and Christoph Friedrich Nicolai. Beyond literary figures, the Illuminati also attracted actor and dramatist Friedrich Ludwig Schröder and composer Christian Cannabich.

Many of these figures joined Weishaupt's group because they subscribed to ideas popular within the German Enlightenment. There is little evidence they wrote about or promoted the Illuminati in their works - a far cry from the modern-day



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conspiratorial interpretation. It seems entirely plausible the presence of 18th-century celebrities in Weishaupt's organization informed the modern view of the Illuminati.

The Illuminati Disbanded In 1785 Due To Its Popularity And Infighting

During its brief existence, the Illuminati became quite popular. According to some reports, the group boasted upwards of 3,000 members by 1784. However, the society's popularity - along with infighting between Adam Weishaupt and Baron Adolph von Knigge - led to the Illuminati's downfall in 1785. Knigge instituted much of the organization's structure (he was a defector from Freemasonry) and continued to add new levels of membership as the years went on. *National Geographic* reports:

> The membership levels also became a more complex hierarchy. There were a total of 13 degrees of initiation, divided into three classes. The first culminated in the degree of *illuminatus minor*, the second *illuminatus dirigens*, and the third, that of king.

Photo: Unknown / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Moreover, according to Conrad Goeringer, Weishaupt also "condemned his former associate [Knigge] for his growing obsession with occultism and ritual." This is ironic since the public eventually associated the Illuminati with occult and satanic practices.

Bavaria Banned Secret Societies - Especially The Illuminati

Baron Adolph von Knigge's removal from the group compelled two members to come forward with inside information on the Illuminati's practices. However, the Catholic Church was already privy to some of their activities. Anti-church propaganda originating from a Masonic lodge dominated by the Illuminati forced that particular branch to close, and a widespread crackdown on secret societies ensued.

Many reports of Illuminati beliefs and activities were false but salacious - especially the notion the group actively conspired against Bavaria on behalf of Austria. This led to an edict from the Duke Elector of Bavaria expressly banning the Illuminati. Adam Weishaupt lost his professorship at the University of Ingolstadt.

The story could have ended there were it not for the rather out-there theories posited by Augustin Barruel, an exiled French priest living in England. Barruel insisted the Illuminati only disbanded on paper and were secretly continuing their revolutionary machinations. However, instead of orchestrating the fall of Bavaria on behalf of Austria, the group allegedly helped instigate the French Revolution.

Barruel published his ideas in 1798, the same year John Robison produced his treatise *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe*, which featured a similar French Revolution theory. In essence, the first formal conspiracy theories were found in the writings of Barruel, Robison, and several others.

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Photo: Johann Georg Ziesenis / Wikimedia Comm ain

A Prank And A Trilogy Of Novels Gave Birth To The Modern-Day Illuminati

Theories on the Illuminati's influence on history resurfaced over 150 years later. Reporting for the BBC, Sophia Smith Galer wrote:

> It all began somewhere amid the Summer of Love and the hippie phenomenon, when a small, printed text emerged: *Principia Discordia.*

> The book was, in a nutshell, a parody text for a parody faith - Discordianism - conjured up by enthusiastic anarchists and thinkers to bid its readers to worship Eris, goddess of chaos. The Discordian movement was ultimately a collective that wished to cause civil disobedience, practical jokes, and hoaxes.

While the book did not involve a real religion, one of the authors of *Principia Discordia*, Kerry Thornley, partnered with writer Robert Anton Wilson, who worked for *Playboy* at the time, to actualize some of the text's ideas. According to Galer, "They wanted to bring chaos back into society to shake things up." Author David Bramwell explains:

Photo: Dell Publishing

> "The way to do that was to spread disinformation. To disseminate misinformation through all portals - through counterculture, through the mainstream media, through whatever means. And they decided they would do that initially by telling stories about the Illuminati.

Thornley and Wilson drafted fictional letters to the editors of *Playboy* sharing information about the mysterious and nefarious organization. They then submitted a second wave of letters countering the claims of the previous entries.

They hoped readers would notice the discrepancies and realize it was all made up. Taking things a step further, Wilson and another *Playboy* writer, Robert Shea, created *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, a collection of surreal, satirical novels.

It implicates the Illuminati in the untimely demises of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. Moreover, one of the books theorizes Adam Weishaupt escaped to America following his disgrace in Bavaria, took out George Washington, and assumed his identity to spread Illuminati influence in the New World.

Again, the authors intended these stories as absurdist historical fiction. However, conspiracy theories about the Illuminati ran amok, and many people began actively claiming the group still existed and wielded power with impunity.

It is thus a rich irony that what was essentially "fake news" from the 1960s led to our modern conception of the Illuminati - all Weishaupt wanted was a society based on wisdom and the search for the truth.

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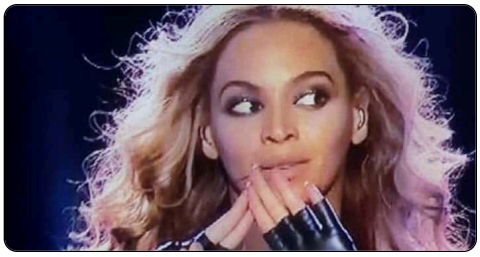
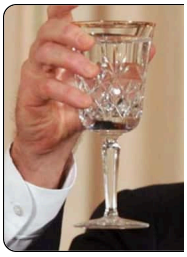


Celebrities Going Off About The Illuminati On Video



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